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Special Edition for Gold King Mine Release

1 - Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

A yellow sludge spilling from a shuttered gold mine into a southwestern Colorado river has reached northern New Mexico. And the wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain from the mine at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill.

<http://www.abqjournal.com/625409/news/wastewater-from-colorado-mine-reaches-new-mexico.html>

2 – New Mexico Environment Department Press Release

<https://www.env.nm.gov/documents/150807PR-OOTSGoldKingMineEPASpill2.pdf>

3 - Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

FARMINGTON, N.M. (AP) — A yellow sludge spilling from a shuttered gold mine into a southwestern Colorado river has reached northern New Mexico.

<http://www.houmatoday.com/article/20150808/APA/308089830>

4 – Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

Mustard colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine...

<http://newsok.com/wastewater-from-colorado-mine-reaches-new-mexico/article/feed/873234>

5 - Wastewater From Colorado Mine Reaches New Mexico

Mustard-colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine in southwestern **Colorado** at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the **Environmental Protection Agency**, which caused the spill.

<http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/wastewater-colorado-mine-reaches-mexico-32973043>

6 - Wastewater Spill Turns Waters Yellow In New State

FARMINGTON, N.M. (AP) — A yellow sludge spilling from a shuttered gold mine into a southwestern Colorado river has reached northern New Mexico, a state official said Saturday.

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/wastewater-spill-turns-waters-orange-in-new-state_55c676b4e4b0923c12bd15fd?utm_hp_ref=green&ir=Green§ion=green&kvcommref=mostpopular

7 - EPA crew accidentally turns Animas River orange

(CNN)A federal cleanup crew accidentally caused a big, and potentially hazardous, mess in Colorado, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

<http://www.cnn.com/2015/08/07/us/colorado-epa-mine-river-spill-irpt/index.html>

8 – Botched EPA Cleanup Spills Mine Waste Into River in Colorado

An environmental cleanup of an abandoned mine in the mountains of Colorado went horribly wrong, leading to the spill of one million gallons of contaminated water into a creek that eventually drains into the San Juan River.

<http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-08-08/botched-epa-cleanup-spills-mine-waste-into-river-in-colorado>

9 – Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico


Mustard-colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill

http://www.santafenewmexican.com/news/wastewater-from-colorado-mine-reaches-new-mexico/article_17dd2929-0cec-544a-bcfe-62648f381335.html?mode=print

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Travis Sells of Farmington looks at the orange sludge flowing past Berg Park. About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when a cleanup crew supervised by the EPA accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine. (Alexa Rogals/The Daily Times via AP)

By [Ivan Moreno And Jacques Billeaud / The Associated Press](#)

UPDATED: Saturday, August 8, 2015 at 9:57 pm



PUBLISHED: Saturday, August 8, 2015 at 1:46 pm



As the Animas River begins to recede it reveals a sludge left behind just north of Durango Colo., on Friday, Aug. 7, 2015, from the Gold King Mine spillage that happened on Wednesday north of Silverton Colo. Federal environmental officials say it's too early to know whether heavy metals that spilled into a river from a Colorado mine pose a health risk. (Jerry McBride/The Durango Herald via AP)

A yellow sludge spilling from a shuttered gold mine into a southwestern Colorado river has reached northern New Mexico. And the wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain from the mine at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill.

The rate of discharge Saturday was down from about 740 gallons per minute on Friday. But, three days after the massive spill, the agency said it still didn't know what the possible environmental and health impacts are.

The agency said it hoped to have a thorough lab analysis of the contaminants, which include lead and arsenic, as soon as Saturday evening or this morning.

"We're busting our tails to get that out," Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGrath said. "We know the importance to people to have this information."

In the meantime, the EPA said it had finished building two containment ponds to treat the yellow sludge. However, the ponds are meant to immediately address the spill, and cleanup efforts will likely take a long time. McGrath could not say whether that means days or weeks.

"This is a long-term impact. The sediment, the metals that are in that sediment, are going to settle out to the stream bottom," he said. "As we have storm surges, as we have flooding events, that sediment can and likely will get kicked back up into the water. We're going to have to do ongoing monitoring."

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday

when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

The plume reached the northern New Mexico cities of Aztec on Friday night and Farmington on Saturday morning. Local government officials in New Mexico and Colorado have blasted the EPA, saying they didn't alert communities soon after the spill and that answers have been slow in coming.

"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing. We still don't know how bad it is," San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants, and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.



A warning sign from the city of Farmington is displayed in front of the Animas River as sludge from a mine spill upstream flows past Berg Park on Saturday. (Alexa Rogals/The Daily Times via AP)

No health hazard has been detected yet. In addition to lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill contains cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results have been released.

Gov. Susana Martinez, State Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn and State Engineer Tom Blaine on Saturday afternoon toured the Animas River in a Black Hawk helicopter and held a news conference at Berg Park in Farmington afterward. The Animas River cuts through the park.

Flynn said the environment department is testing the river every six hours and is making arrangements to have nearby residents' water wells tested. He said in a phone interview Saturday evening that he had freed up \$500,000 in emergency funds to aid municipal water systems and conduct sampling.

He said his and other state agencies acted quickly to sample and identify potential dangers with the incoming plume and repeatedly said the EPA, which he said had been "slow" in its response, needed to arrive in the state as quickly as possible to coordinate with them, and provide more resources and specific data about the contaminants in the plume.

"There will be accountability and those are conversations we can have," Flynn said. "But right now we need to work together and come together. ... We're all heavily engaged. We need EPA. We want them here."

New Mexico Senators Martin Heinrich and Tom Udall called the release of the wastewater "deeply troubling" and "of great concern," respectively.

Both said that their offices are working with the EPA and other officials and agencies to monitor the situation and response.

"The EPA must be forthcoming with information and work with the State and the Navajo Nation to mitigate the damage from this spill," Heinrich said in a statement. "I expect the EPA to protect the health and safety of impacted communities in northwest New

Mexico.”

Udall noted that the Animas and San Juan rivers are important drinking water sources and said, “I will push for answers to how this incident happened, and I won’t rest until we are sure that any possible impacts to the downstream communities or the environment have been addressed to the greatest extent possible.”

In addition to New Mexico, wastewater from the mine was also inching toward Utah.

The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

Officials said the contamination would likely settle into sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers. Aerial photos showed the slow-moving yellow water snaking by scenic mountain roads surrounded by pine trees.

While awaiting further results on the concentration levels of the metals in the water, the EPA released results Saturday showing how acidic the water became after the spill.

In Cement Creek, near the spill, the water registered a pH level of 3.74, which the EPA said is similar to the acidity of tomato juice and apples. Farther downstream, in Silverton, pH levels were found to be about 4.8, which is similar to liquid black coffee.

The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

At least two of the heavy metals found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.

Journal staff writers Patrick Lohmann and Ryan Boetel contributed to this report.



Ducks wade in the Animas River as orange sludge from a mine spill upstream flows past Berg Park in Farmington on Saturday. (Alexa Rogals/The Daily Times via AP)

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Contact: Allison Scott Majure
Communications Director | New Mexico Environment Department
505.231.8800 | Allison.majure@state.nm.us

Environment Department Actions Address EPA Gold King Mine Spill *Contaminated Plume Expected To Pass Aztec/Farmington Area Friday Evening*

Santa Fe –New Mexico Environment Secretary Ryan Flynn and State Engineer Tom Blaine are in Farmington and Aztec, New Mexico today, working with local and regional leaders as well as federal staff to alert and advise San Juan County citizens of safety precautions, monitoring and testing activities, and important Environment Department actions responsive to the EPA Gold King Mine wastewater release that occurred last Wednesday and is now coursing through the Animas River.

- The contaminated plume is expected to pass the Aztec/Farmington area tonight.
- Today, the Environment Department authorized up to \$500,000 in emergency funds to conduct activities in response to the King Gold Mine spill.
- Today, the Environment Department is deploying real time water quality monitors (called sondes) in the Animas River at three sites. This water quality monitoring activity is separate from the Environmental Protection Agency's sampling activities to ensure promptness and transparency. Secretary Flynn reported "We have yet to receive any data from EPA concerning San Juan County water quality."
- Today, the Environment Department is independently collecting water samples to test for pH, heavy metals and other constituents of concern.
- While on site today, the State Engineer Tom Blaine and Secretary Flynn have briefed the public, local leadership, and all stakeholders to stay out of the river and to refrain from pulling water from the river for any purpose.
- New Mexico's Department of Game and Fish advises anglers not to fish in the Animas River and not to eat fish caught in the San Juan River watershed.
- Today, the Environment Department coordinated with the San Juan County Emergency Operation Center to get potable water stations set up at local fire stations.
- The Department of Game and Fish is monitoring the possible effects on New Mexico fisheries and wildlife from a contamination dam spill August 5 at the Gold King Mine above Silverton, Colorado.

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Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

Published: Sunday, August 9, 2015 at 4:05 a.m.

FARMINGTON, N.M. (AP) — A yellow sludge spilling from a shuttered gold mine into a southwestern Colorado river has reached northern New Mexico.

San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper says the plume arrived in the city of Aztec on Friday night and Farmington on Saturday morning.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling Wednesday when a cleanup crew supervised by the Environmental Protection Agency accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

No health hazard has been detected, but tests were being analyzed. Federal officials say the spill contains heavy metals including lead and arsenic.

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News News: US

Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

Published on NewsOK Modified: August 9, 2015 at 4:05 am • Published: August 9, 2015

Mustard-colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill.



Ducks wade in the Animas River as orange sludge from a mine spill upstream flows past Berg Park in Farmington, N.M., Saturday, Aug. 8, 2015. About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when a cleanup crew supervised by the Environmental Protection Agency accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine. The mine has been inactive since 1923(Alexa Rogals/The Daily Times via AP)

The rate of discharge Saturday was down from about 740 gallons per minute on Friday. But three days after the massive spill, the agency said it still didn't know what the possible environmental and health impacts are.

The agency said it hoped to have a thorough lab analysis of the contaminants — which include lead and arsenic — as soon as Sunday morning.

"We're busting our tails to get that out," Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGrath said. "We know the importance to people to have this information."

In the meantime, the EPA said it had finished building two containment ponds to treat the yellow sludge. However, the ponds are meant to immediately address the spill and cleanup efforts will likely take a long time. McGrath could not say whether that means days or weeks.

"This is a long-term impact. The sediment, the metals that are in that sediment are going to settle out to the stream bottom," he said. "As we have storm surges, as we have flooding events, that sediment can and likely will get kicked back up into the water. We're going to have to do ongoing monitoring."

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

The plume reached the northern New Mexico cities of Aztec on Friday night, Farmington on Saturday morning and Kirtland on Saturday afternoon. The plume has been visually diluted and the leading edge of it is far less defined. The water is reported to be muddy with an orange tinge rather than solid orange.

Local government officials in New Mexico and Colorado have blasted the EPA, saying they didn't alert communities soon after the spill and that answers have been slow in coming.

"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing. We still don't know how bad it is," San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.

No health hazard has been detected yet. In addition to lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill contains cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results have been released.

In addition to New Mexico, wastewater from the mine was also inching toward Utah.

The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

Officials said the contamination would likely settle into sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers. Aerial photos showed the slow-moving yellow water snaking by scenic mountain roads surrounded by pine trees.

While awaiting further results on the concentration levels of the metals in the water, the EPA released results Saturday showing how acidic the water became after the spill.

In Cement Creek, near the spill, the water registered a pH level of 3.74, which the EPA said is similar to the acidity of tomato juice and apples. Further downstream, in Silverton, pH levels were found to be about 4.8, which is similar to liquid black coffee.

The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

At least two of the heavy metals found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.



Wastewater From Colorado Mine Reaches New Mexico

Tainted wastewater from Colorado mine spill reaches New Mexico

By IVAN MORENO

The Associated Press

Mustard-colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine in southwestern [Colorado](#) at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the [Environmental Protection Agency](#), which caused the spill.

The rate of discharge Saturday was down from about 740 gallons per minute on Friday. But three days after the massive spill, the agency said it still didn't know what the possible environmental and health impacts are.

The agency said it hoped to have a thorough lab analysis of the contaminants ??? which include lead and arsenic ??? as soon as Sunday morning.

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In the meantime, the EPA said it had finished building two containment ponds to treat the yellow sludge. However, the ponds are meant to immediately address the spill and cleanup efforts will likely take a long time. McGrath could not say whether that means days or weeks.

"This is a long-term impact. The sediment, the metals that are in that sediment are going to settle out to the stream bottom," he said. "As we have storm surges, as we have flooding events, that sediment can and likely will get kicked back up into the water. We're going to have to do ongoing monitoring."

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

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"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing. We still don't know how bad it is," San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.

No health hazard has been detected yet. In addition to lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill contains cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results have been released.

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Officials said the contamination would likely settle into sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers. Aerial photos showed the slow-moving yellow water snaking by scenic mountain roads surrounded by pine trees.

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The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

At least two of the heavy metals found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.

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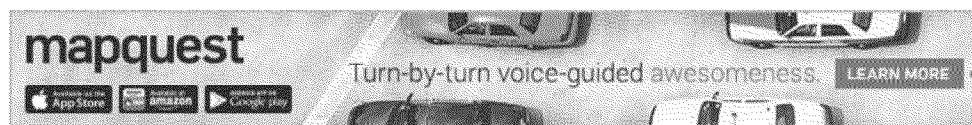
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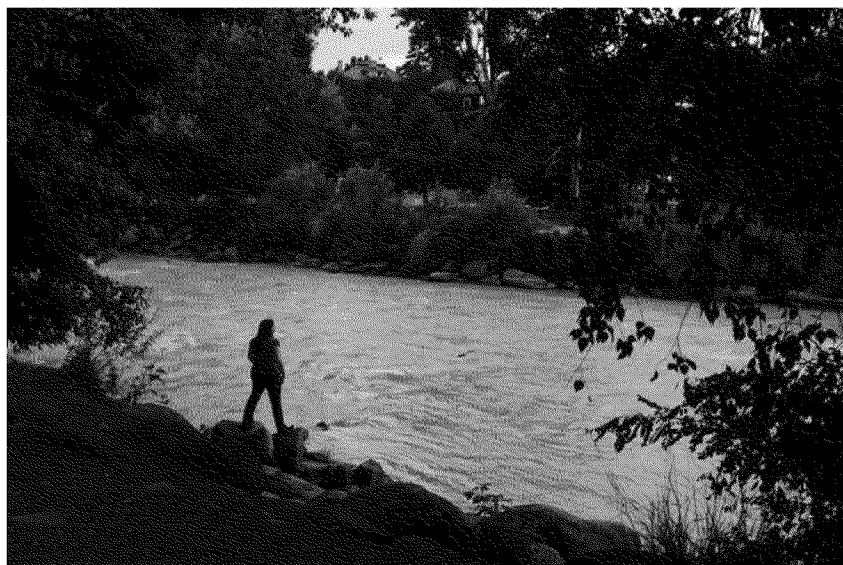


Wastewater Spill Turns Waters Yellow In New State

Towns were put on alert, and the water could reach Utah soon.

AP

Posted: 08/08/2015 05:57 PM EDT | Edited: 08/08/2015 05:59 PM EDT



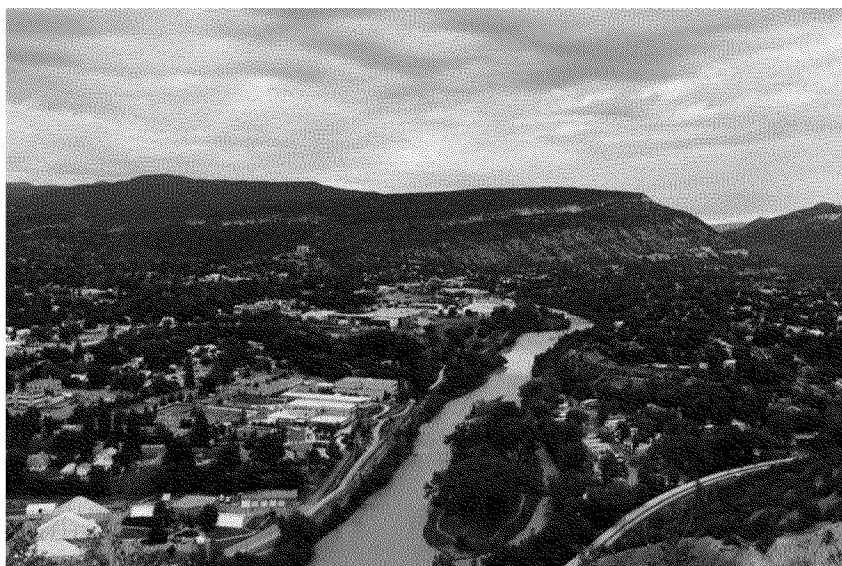
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Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water resources to draw from.

"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away (from the river) and keep testing," Cooper said. "We still don't know how bad it is."

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when a cleanup crew supervised by the Environmental Protection Agency accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.



The mine has been inactive since 1923.

No health hazard has been detected, but tests were being analyzed. Federal officials say the spill contains heavy metals including lead and arsenic.

The EPA planned to release additional information Saturday afternoon.

In addition to New Mexico, wastewater from the mine was also inching toward Utah.

The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

The spilled water also contained cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

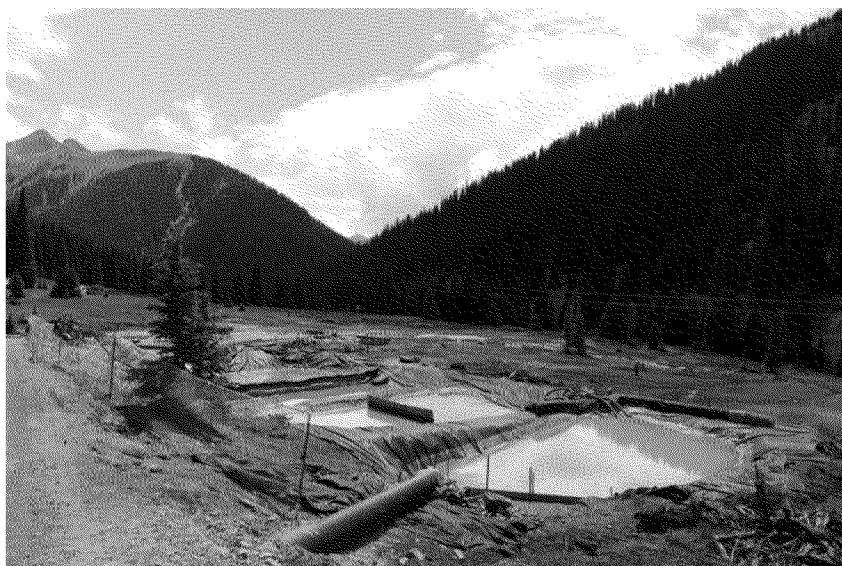
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The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

At least two of the heavy metals found in the wastewater can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

Water continues to spill from the mine at a rate of about 700 gallons per minute, Joan Cardan, adviser to Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGraw, said Saturday. Crews were building containment ponds to catch and treat the water.



Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results had been released.

Officials said the contamination would likely settle into sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McCann-Vanderpool said.

Associated Press writer Jacques Billaud reported from Phoenix, and Ivan Moreno reported from Denver.

MORE: Epa Spill, Waste Spill, River Spill, Pollution

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EPA crew accidentally turns Animas River orange



By Eli Watkins, CNN

Updated 7:45 AM ET, Sat August 8, 2015

| Video Source: KRQE



EPA accidentally turns river orange



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Story highlights

A federal cleanup crew accidentally caused a big, and potentially hazardous, mess in Colorado.

Officials believe the mine waste carried heavy metals, mainly iron, zinc and copper, from the mine into the Animas River.

(CNN)—A federal cleanup crew accidentally caused a big, and potentially hazardous, mess in Colorado, according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

An estimated 1 million gallons of wastewater spilled out of an abandoned mine area in the southern part of the state on Wednesday, turning the Animas River orange and prompting the EPA to tell locals to avoid it.

"When I first saw it, I was speechless, [the river] didn't look real," said Durango, Colorado, resident Ian Lucier. "But in person, it truly looks like the river was turned into carrot juice."

Accounts of the spill's striking appearance flooded social media as the waste pushed its way downriver. Lucier posted a clip he took of the river with his drone to Instagram.



BREAKING NEWS

Former NFL star and sportscaster Frank Gifford has died, his family said in a statement released by NBC.

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A short clip with some of the footage I got of the #orangeriver here in #durangocolorado #colorado #drone #dji #phantom #video

A video posted by Ian Lee (@lli_photography) on Aug 6, 2015 at 9:28pm PDT

According to the EPA, the spill occurred when one of its teams was using heavy equipment to enter the Gold King Mine, a suspended mine near Durango. Instead of entering the mine and beginning the process of pumping and treating the contaminated water inside as planned, the team accidentally caused it to flow into the nearby Animas River. Before the spill, water carrying "metals pollution" was flowing into a holding area outside the mine.

The EPA began testing the Animas River for hazardous materials on Thursday. EPA spokesperson Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said the agency hoped to have preliminary information available throughout Friday and Saturday. Until then, it is not known what the orange, acidic mess might mean for water users and the river's ecosystem.

Officials said they believe the spill carried heavy metals, mainly iron, zinc and copper, from the mine into a creek that feeds into the Animas River. From there, the orange water plugged steadily along through the small stretch of winding river in southern Colorado and across the state border to New Mexico where the Animas meets the San Juan River. The EPA said it will continue to sample water downstream from the mine until the contamination has passed and it determines there are "no additional concerns for aquatic life or water users." When asked if the spill could affect drinking water, the EPA spokesperson said she did not yet know.

The uncertainty surrounding the situation, along with the images of an orange plume flowing downriver, has left many concerned and frustrated.

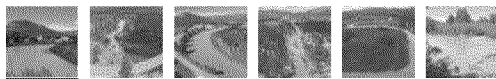
"It's not good for the environment. I'm sure there's going to be dead fish and plants near the river," one New Mexico resident told CNN affiliate KOAT.

e 6 photos

"It was devastating to see this happen to our community. I was just in the river last weekend and we all love it around here," said Ryan Urban, who shot this photo in Hermosillo. "Whenever there is any type of oil spill or waste in the water, it makes me hurt for the earth."

1 of 6

Hide Caption



Botched EPA Cleanup Spills Mine Waste Into River in Colorado

Mark Drajem

August 8, 2015 — 12:29 PM CDT



A man looks out over the Animas River, on Aug. 6, 2015. A spill of contaminated water flowed into the river and put the city of Durango, Colorado on alert.

An environmental cleanup of an abandoned mine in the mountains of Colorado went horribly wrong, leading to the spill of one million gallons of contaminated water into a creek that eventually drains into the San Juan River.

The incident happened when workers for the Environmental Protection Agency were trying to clean the long-abandoned Gold King Mine, but allowed it to breach a berm, or small strip of raised land, and the toxic water flowed into the Animas River. It turned the clear mountain stream a mustard orange color, according to photos posted online. The local sheriff's office on Aug. 6 closed the river to swimming, kayaking and rafting, and it remained closed Saturday.

"It's a sad irony that a program attempting to avoid harm to the environment, appears to have caused it," said Taylor McKinnon, public lands coordinator for the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit group in Colorado. As the polluted waste moves downstream, "it will dilute, but we don't know what's in this water," McKinnon said.

According to a statement posted online by the San Juan Basin Health Department, the acidic mine water contains high levels of sediment and metals. Officials warned downstream users to shut off intake valves.

The EPA said in a statement Saturday that it is providing technical and laboratory assistance, and that tests found an elevated concentration of acid and higher levels of such metals as copper, zinc and manganese in areas affected by the spill.

Downstream Impacts

The five drinking water systems that might be impacted downstream in New Mexico have closed off intakes from the river and won't start up again until water quality samples improve, the EPA said. The water systems have the ability to store water or use alternative sources, the agency said.

The EPA, through its Superfund program, has been investigating the toxic chemicals in water and soil around abandoned mines near Silverton, Colorado, in the mountains in the southeast part of the state. The Animas River has had declining water quality since 2008, showing increased levels of heavy metals, making it toxic to most trout.

Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

The Associated Press | Posted: Saturday, August 8, 2015 9:00 pm

Mustard-colored wastewater laced with heavy metals continues to drain into a river from an abandoned mine in southwestern Colorado at a rate of about 550 gallons per minute, according to the Environmental Protection Agency, which caused the spill.

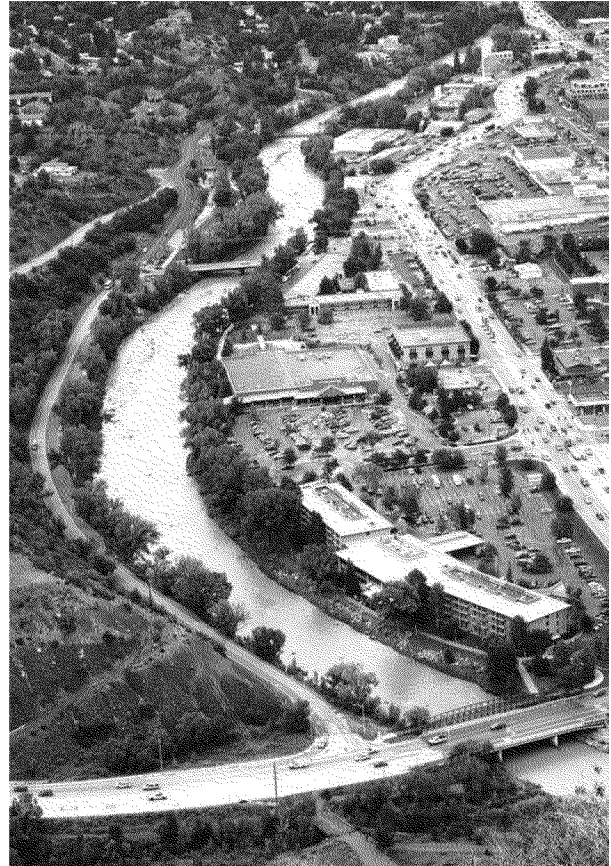
The rate of discharge Saturday was down from about 740 gallons per minute on Friday. But three days after the massive spill, the agency said it still didn't know what the possible environmental and health impacts are.

The agency said it hoped to have a thorough lab analysis of the contaminants — which include lead and arsenic — as soon as Saturday evening or Sunday morning.

“We’re busting our tails to get that out,” Environmental Protection Agency Regional Director Shaun McGrath said. “We know the importance to people to have this information.”

In the meantime, the EPA said it had finished building two containment ponds to treat the yellow sludge. However, the ponds are meant to immediately address the spill and cleanup efforts will likely take a long time. McGrath could not say whether that means days or weeks.

“This is a long-term impact. The sediment, the metals that are in that sediment are going to settle out to the stream bottom,” he said. “As we have storm surges, as we have flooding events, that sediment can and likely will get kicked back up into the water. We’re going to have to do ongoing monitoring.”



Wastewater from Colorado mine reaches New Mexico

A toxic sludge flows down the Animas River through Durango Colo., on Friday, Aug. 7, 2015, after the Gold King Mine north of Silverton Colo., spilled heavy minerals into the river on Wednesday. Federal environmental officials say it's too early to know whether heavy metals that spilled into a river from a Colorado mine pose a health risk. Jerry McBride/The Durango Herald via AP

About 1 million gallons of wastewater from Colorado's Gold King Mine began spilling into the Animas River on Wednesday when an EPA-supervised cleanup crew accidentally breached a debris dam that had formed inside the mine.

The mine has been inactive since 1923.

The plume reached the northern New Mexico cities of Aztec on Friday night, and Farmington on Saturday morning. Local government officials in New Mexico and Colorado have blasted the EPA, saying they didn't alert communities soon after the spill and that answers have been slow in coming.

"There's not a lot we can do. We can keep people away [from the river] and keep testing. We still don't know how bad it is," San Juan County Emergency Management Director Don Cooper said.

Officials in both cities shut down the river's access to water treatment plants and say the communities have a 90-day supply of water and other water sources to draw from.

No health hazard has been detected yet. In addition to lead and arsenic, federal officials say the spill contains cadmium, aluminum, copper and calcium, but the concentrations were not yet known.

Water samples were also tested in New Mexico, but no results have been released.

In addition to New Mexico, wastewater from the mine was also inching toward Utah.

The Animas flows into the San Juan River in New Mexico, and the San Juan flows into Utah, where it joins the Colorado River in Lake Powell.

Officials said the contamination would likely settle into sediment in Lake Powell. Glen Canyon National Recreation Area officials said visitors will be warned starting Monday to avoid drinking, swimming or boating on affected stretches of the lake and river until further notice.

The spill from the mine flowed down Cement Creek and into the scenic Animas River, which is popular with boaters and anglers. Aerial photos showed the slow-moving yellow water snaking by scenic mountain roads surrounded by pine trees.

While awaiting further results on the concentration levels of the metals in the water, the EPA released results Saturday showing how acidic the water became after the spill.

In Cement Creek, near the spill, the water registered a pH level of 3.74, which the EPA said is similar to the acidity of tomato juice and apples. Further downstream, in Silverton, pH levels were found to be about 4.8, which is similar to liquid black coffee.

The EPA warned people to stay out of the river and to keep domestic animals from drinking from it. Local officials declared stretches of the river off-limits in Colorado and New Mexico.

At least two of the heavy metals found in the waste water can be lethal for humans with long-term exposure. Arsenic at high levels can cause blindness, paralysis and cancer. Lead poisoning can create muscle and vision problems for adults, harm development in fetuses and lead to kidney disease, developmental problems and sometimes death in children, the EPA said.

When the spill happened, the EPA-supervised crew was trying to enter the mine to pump out and treat the water, EPA spokeswoman Lisa McClain-Vanderpool said.